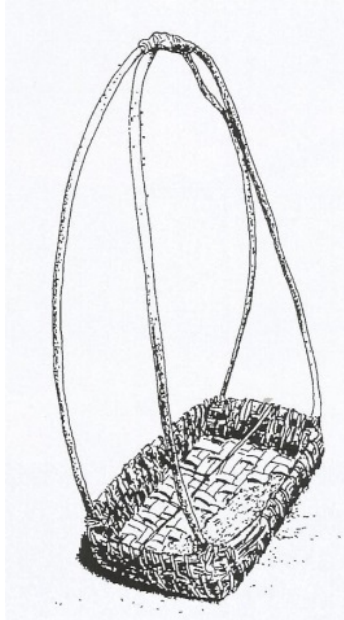

Crossing threads - researchers, collections, comparisons, and language



L: Wild fonio-gathering basket (Soninke region, Upper Senegal Valley) (1)

R: The first illustration of corn, *Zea mays*, in a Renaissance Herbal (Leonhart Fuchs, *De historia stirpium*, Bâle, Isingrin, 1542) (2)

(1) Published in Monique Chastanet, 1991, <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00709119>

(2) Published, among other references, in Monique Chastanet et Alain Charcosset, 2007, <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00687756>

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A rural history research itinerary – between Africa and France

This is about my work, some of it undertaken at my own initiative, some linked to group projects. On the whole, they were enriched by exchanges with colleagues and students, and most especially by the people I encountered in my fieldwork.

I. Western Africa (Senegal, Mauritania, Mali), Upper Senegal Valley (Haute Vallée du Sénégal), Senegambia, Bend of the Niger

I began my work on the **history of 19th and 20th-century food crises** in a Soninke region of Senegal, all the while doing comparative research on other Soninke “lands” in Mauritania and Mali. This led me to study agro-pastoral practices in the Sahel and adaptation strategies to a high-limit environment.

It is in this context that I came to be interested in local skills and material culture, especially agricultural tools and a basket used to gather ‘wild fonio’ that I observed in villages (but not in museums...). (Fonio is a spontaneous grass, *Panicum* sp. and other species, eaten in periods of cereal shortage, and different from cultivated fonio, *Digitaria exilis*, less present in the Sahel.) From this interest in food for hard times, I went on an a broader approach to **food**

history, covering a wider geographic area and going farther back in time, as much as possible with the sources available: the history of certain dishes such as couscous and the dish called *sanglé* in Senegambia, or the history of *cuisine* in Timbuktu. That brought me to examine more closely tools and vessels used in food preparation and consumption, so that I also looked into **plant history**: how gathering practices had declined in the Soninke milieu, highly affected by emigration, and how an American plant, corn (*Zea mays*), had spread in Senegambia. After that, I went on to a study of sesame in Upper Senegal: peanuts replaced this crop (especially *Sesamum indicum*), although spontaneous species continue to be used, if not as food. I am now pursuing my work on the **history of food practices** in the Sudano-Sahelian Africa through analysis of René Caillié's early 19th-century travel account.

My research in Africa is based on crossing written sources (travelers' accounts, Atlantic trade and colonial archives) and oral sources (collecting retrospective testimony and formalized traditions, such as historical narratives, work songs, proverbs). All this entails observation and analysis of gestures and technical processes in agriculture and cooking, as well as examination of terminology used in the language(s) concerned. As in any other oral culture, some terms vary highly from one place to another, hence my interest for questions of nomenclature, which also concern agriculture and food museums.

II. France

For the last few years, I have carried on parallel research into French rural history. In 1998, work on the **history of corn in lower Corrèze** (first attested in the 17th century as a complementary grain in agriculture and food) enabled me to take part in an exhibit on corn in France organized by the Ecomusée de la Bresse bourguignonne (Museum of Burgundian Bresse in Pierre-de-Bresse, Saône-et-Loire). My interest in this plant subsequently led me to **collaboration with INRA (National Agricultural Research Institute) geneticists on the history of the multiple introduction of corn in France and western Europe**: genetic analysis and rereading of travelers' accounts, as well as Renaissance herbals, tend to indicate a very old introduction of North American varieties, as early as the 16th century. I pursued my research on the Limousin region through a study of the **beginnings of the potato in Corrèze cooking**, based on a Limousin dialect-French dictionary published in 1823 containing a wealth of ethnographic information far ahead of its time. Recently, I analysed the **relations between peasant foodways and weather in Corrèze** from the end of the 18th century to the 1930s, through a corpus of sayings, names for the seasons and famine years. These two publications led me to take an interest in various kitchen utensils, some of them in local museums.

This made me realise that object typology has to be associated with nomenclature. This is how, for Corrèze, you can distinguish two sorts of "pot" (French *marmite*), with different names, shapes and uses (for cooking soup or chestnuts). These cooking pots cannot be properly indexed in collections if they are not described, but also correctly named. This is a particular problem in a region where, only a few years ago, there were two languages: French and Limousin (a dialect form of the North Occitan zone). The Limousin terms, when they are there at all, are not always used in a rigorous way, and this is complicated by the evolution of transcription systems for the Langue d'Oc (Occitan) since the early 19th century. Historians, ethnologists and museum keepers all have to face the challenge of language and naming issues.
